

Review: WORKING AT THE HUMAN LEVEL: Interview with Marcel Ophüls by Jean-Michel Frodon

Reviewed Work(s): Filmmaker Marcel Ophüls, director of such landmark documentaries as *The Sorrow and the Pity* (1971) and *A Sense of Loss* (1972), has recently brought us *Veillées d'armes* (*The Troubles We've Seen: A History of Journalism in Wartime*). Here, Ophüls speaks of some of the political, artistic, and ethical challenges he encountered in the creation of this extraordinary film by

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PEOPLE AND IDEAS

WORKING AT THE HUMAN LEVEL

Interview with Marcel Ophüls
by Jean-Michel Frodon

Filmmaker Marcel Ophüls, director of such landmark documentaries as The Sorrow and the Pity (1971) and A Sense of Loss (1972), has recently brought us Veillées d'armes (translated as The Troubles We've Seen: A History of Journalism in Wartime). Here, Ophüls speaks of some of the political, artistic, and ethical challenges he encountered in the creation of this extraordinary film.

Jean-Michel Frodon: How did you make *Veillées d'armes*?

Marcel Ophüls: Like all my previous documentaries: they are “postscripted” films. I never use voice-over narration. I detest films that are illustrated editorials.

I have never considered that the correctness of a cause meant that all methods were allowed. It is not just by chance that John Huston, George Stevens, and William Wyler made the best documentaries about World War II, and that subsequently, Eisenhower wanted nothing to do with them! Why? Because they have a personal point of view and an understanding of dramatic structure: they are filmmakers.

On the other hand, when the dominant culture or the dominant counterculture uses images in a collective spirit, they result—regardless of the individual convictions of the directors—in collectivist films. They result in propaganda, rather than films “at the human level.”

My method of working consists of filming as much as possible—for *Veillées d'armes* I had about one hundred and twenty-five hours of rushes. Next, I go off to write the script based on that material. This is where the real work begins, the search to find how a certain smile fits with a certain gesture, to unite what goes together and makes sense, what tells a story and expresses an idea, or ideas. I deplore those who use documentaries to avoid ideas.

J-M. F.: Among those ideas is the parallel between the current situation in Bosnia and the situation prior to World War II.

M. O.: The comparison is inevitable, but it reaches a limit. The major difference between Sarajevo and Madrid—besieged as it was by Franco supporters—is that the Serbs have no equivalent to Hitler or

Mussolini backing them. It is not so much a tidal wave of fascism as a tidal wave of cynicism that must be stopped today. Which leads to another difference: the noninterventionists of the past had reasons to fear Hitler, whereas this time around, we are retreating before an army of mean and brutal soldiers, of drunks and rapists whose commanders are second-rate bluffers. If we do make this comparison, then it is to the discredit of today's cowards. I spent three months in the company of Daladier when I was making *Munich ou la paix pour cent ans* [Munich or one hundred years of peace]; he showed lucidity and humility with regard to what he had done. I have sought in vain an equivalent to his attitude in the arrogance of our current leaders. . . .

If we find the necessary wherewithal, this will be the subject of a third film: the betrayal of politicians and the way in which they orchestrated a media lie to prevent the public from becoming alarmed. Their only excuse is that there are no volunteers in Europe today willing to go fight in Sarajevo. If we are supposed to believe that we need the Comintern in order for international brigades to exist, then the human condition is truly rotten.

J-M. F.: At the beginning of your film, Philippe Noiret points out that after World War II, it was said that if people could have seen what was happening, they would have stopped the horrors. Yet today we see what is happening, but nothing has changed. On the other hand, some believe that, rather than revealing reality, images help to mask it.





Pages 70–71: Film stills from Marcel Ophüls, *Veillées d'armes: Le Journalisme en Temps de Guerre* (The Troubles We've Seen: A History of Wartime Journalism), 1994, 35mm, color, 233 minutes.

M. O.: I went to Sarajevo without pre-conceived notions, and I was captivated by those journalists who take genuine risks to try to inform and raise public awareness. One of them, John Burns, says that contrary to what normally occurs in large hotels that become a base for the international press during conflicts, there are *no* debates at the Holiday Inn in Sarajevo. Everyone knows who the aggressor is, who the bastards are. So, unlike what Romain Goupil says in my film, it seems to me that journalists are doing their job. But they are trapped: they are prisoners and they know it. Stephane Manier says that when he returns to Paris and is complimented for his “excellent subject,” he feels ashamed.

When editors in Paris, London, or New York demand human flesh for their human interest stories and journalists must find and deliver three minutes’ footage of a blinded child, it is unbearable.

It is the manner in which these images are used and the behavior of television stations at all levels that create the problem. In *Veillées d'armes*, I accuse Canal Plus (incidentally, a coproducer of the film) of showing murderous irresponsibility by sending twenty-three people without any protection to make one episode of the program *24 Heures*. . . . At the same time, the control of images today is frightening. I have to pay astronomical fees when I use film excerpts. When I show how television news summaries are put together, where it is deemed better to begin with Prost’s triumph than the bombing of Sarajevo, I am attacked by FOCA (the organization that markets Formula One) for showing an image of the racer that everyone had seen.

The film talks about these obstacles and distortions; however, I reject the relativistic way of thinking that maintains that to show images or not to show them amounts

to the same thing. When there are no cameras, it’s total barbarism. . . . When one is a documentary filmmaker, one does not have the right to be relativistic. There is only one reality: either collective rapes are occurring or they are not—reality is not somewhere between the two. If they are occurring, then the story must be told and they must be shown, even practically. It is like the fable of the twelve blind men who come across an elephant: each one taps a part of the animal with his cane and together they conclude—it’s an elephant. Because they share information. When one begins to doubt the possibility of capturing the truth, much less whether it even exists, one quickly reaches a point where “it’s all the same”—that is, cynicism, the worst possible point.

Translated from the French by Karin Lundell.

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